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**Symbolic Content in Textile Motifs:  
Using the Semiotic Approach  
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**Defining Semiotics**

John Deely (1990) stated that “the whole of human experience...is an interpretive structure mediated and sustained by signs”. The investigation of the role of signs in the sphere of textiles is, to use Deely’s phrase, one of “semiotic consciousness” or the awareness of symbolic content in clothing, cloth and textile motifs.

Semiotics is the theoretical accounting for signs and what they do. It is the study of signs and sign-using behavior including *semiosis* or the action of signs. The action, which may be physical or psychological, takes place between two subjects that exist physically plus a third element that need not be an actual existing thing. For example, action may consist of the motif on a textile, a viewer and a psychological reaction on the part of the viewer.

The words *sign* and *symbol* are not synonymous. A sign is a mark, emblem or pictogram that conveys specific information in a direct and unambiguous manner. A symbol is a sign, device or image that represents one thing but means something else. A symbol derives meaning from those who use it.

A textile sign or symbol may be portrayed realistically (representatively) or in an abstract (simplified) style. A symbol can additionally be portrayed in a non-objective or non-representational style. People who use the symbol in a cultural sense understand its meaning or implication regardless of how it is portrayed.

**Obstacles to Understanding**

Semiotic research in textile motifs requires a multidisciplinary approach, a familiarity with many facets of the culture and attention to what can seem to be obscure details. Its subjectivity can spark controversy since the investigator must decide which motif might possibly be a symbol and then attempt to decipher the meaning behind that symbol.

When using the semiotic approach in a research problem, it may be difficult for the investigator to uncover the meaning of symbols for several reasons: first, the meaning may be cloaked in secrecy within the society, concealed from ‘outsiders’ and at times, also from some within the society; second, the meaning may be forgotten over time; third, the meaning may change over time; and fourth, the pictorial representation may be altered over time.

**Clifford Geertz and Symbolic Anthropology**

*Symbolic Anthropology*, employing semiotics, is a later twentieth century anthropological paradigm. It is dedicated to the study and research of the processes by which people give meaning to their world and their actions in it (Applebaum, 1987). Anthropologists who

use this paradigm engage in research that is universal in scope. They draw upon all types of objects and gestures including signs and symbols connected to all phases of human activity.

Clifford Geertz is the principal architect of this paradigm. His book, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) is considered one of the seminal works on the subject. In symbolic anthropology, people are seen as meaning-seeking, symbol-using animals. Geertz feels that anthropology should shift from searching for explanations to searching for meaning (in other words, how we do things is less important than why we do them).

He emphasized the importance of the case study and the need for using the “native” point of view to seek meaning and to make the researcher sensitive to the views of others. He called this method *thick description*, borrowing the term from philosopher Gilbert Ryle (Geertz, 6). Using *thick description*, Geertz compared one version of an event with another and one set of perceptions with another, while melding the perceptions and knowledge of the observer to those of the “native”. He explained that in evaluating information “you can tell a better account from a worse one...(by)...whether it sorts winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones”(16).

Geertz continued by warning the researcher “that to commit oneself to a semiotic concept of culture and an interpretive approach to the study of it is to commit oneself to a view of ethnographic assertion as...’essentially contestable’”. Further, as a science, its “progress is marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate”(29). Essentially, Geertz defends the use of qualitative methods as not only a valid research approach, but also feels that for cultural understanding, it is the most accurate one.

### **A Moroccan Example of the Process of *Thick Description***

The following anecdote is a simplified illustration of the process that Geertz refers to as *thick description*. In a recent investigation of symbolism in the material culture of Morocco, I observed that a common motif on Moroccan textiles also appeared regularly on village doors. I asked an informant why village doors were decorated with the lozenge-shaped motif and suggested that the design might have some significance. The informant stated that the motif was popular on doors only because door makers liked it. Another informant said that it had no meaning and was merely decorative. I asked a Berber textile merchant about the significance of the motif and was told that it was a protective symbol used to ward off the ‘evil eye’.

In my next inquiry I connected rugs and doors, pointing out to a Berber informant that most doors in the villages were decorated with some version of the same motif that had been identified to me as a protective device by people in the textile market. “Oh yes,” he said, “it is used as a protection against the ‘evil eye’ on textiles, but on doors it is only decorative”. A symbol or sign can have one meaning in one social context and another in a different context; thus the investigator can receive different answers from different informants.

### Changes in Meaning

The next step in Clifford Geertz's *thick description* is to "meld the perceptions and knowledge of the observer to those of the 'native' ". In the Moroccan case, it is possible that when nomadic tribes became settled, the protective symbolism shifted from the textile that covered the tent entrance, to the door of the village dwelling. Its original meaning was likely to moderate or disappear as the culture changed with settled life.

The religion of the indigenous Berber people was animistic before their conversion to Islam by Arab invaders and a reluctance to abandon old beliefs has persisted; however, proscriptions against pre-Islamic 'superstitions' are more strongly enforced in urban settings than they are in rural areas. The design on the doorway may have eventually been viewed as an expression of "traditional" design, retaining a vague connection to the idea of positive forces often identified as "good luck". Since textiles retained their basic physical form and function, any symbolism attached to their motifs survived the change of location; whereas a change in material, from yarn to wood in this case, required design modification that caused a weakening in the connection to the original symbol.

Over time, repeated rendering of the same design can also cause the appearance of the motif to change as it is successively duplicated. Makers may see each variation as a different design even when all variations have similar meaning. Over time motifs acquire fanciful names not connected to their original meanings, causing symbolism to be forgotten or altered. This can render once powerful symbolism meaningless even to those within the society in which it originally developed.

Among Moroccan Berber people, two symbols called *lion's paw* and *finger* are very similar in design and have the same meaning, that of protection from evil. Fear of the 'evil eye' is a ruling factor in the lives of people in many conservative rural societies. Being cursed by the 'evil eye' takes a variety of forms associated with disease and infertility not only of people but also of animals and crops. Two other symbols, *spider* and *frog*, have the same basic design structure as the *lion's paw* and *finger* and their meaning is related to magic and fertility.

### An Example from Eastern Europe

Textile motifs from other cultures also suggest that many forms derive from common sources and are not only similar in design but have associated meanings. In a case study of Czech and Slovak embroidery using the semiotic approach, I found that most designs used on ceremonial textiles from the 1600s to the 1900s appear to derive from the foliated *tree of life*, *goddess*, *sown field*, and *animal horns* or a combination of them. These motifs, regardless of the names attached to them, are associated with the concepts of protection from evil and fertility (Williams 1999).

Czech investigator Antonin Vaclavik, who worked in the 1950s, reported that an embroidery symbol called *wedding cake* represented poppy seed-filled pastry. He explained that the dots of the motif represented the seeds and the crossbars represented the cheese on the cake. Village women were undoubtedly aware of the traditional allusion to fertility presented by the many seeds of the poppy and visually connected the form of

the motif with a traditional cake served at weddings. In this case the form and symbolic meaning were retained over an extensive period of time.

Familiarity with other symbolism reveals that this motif differs from an ancient fertility symbol only in name and in the perception of what physical object is portrayed in the embroidery. The *wedding cake* symbol seems to be a modern version of an ancient symbol known to archaeologists as the *sown field*. It is found incised on the abdomen of female figurines from the eastern European Cucuteni culture of 4500 BC, where the motif is impressed with real grain. This ideogram was also present on seventh millennium stamp seals from Anatolia.

An additional connection to the ancient *sown field* motif is a symbol that Vaclavik called *dice*. He originally called it *grapes* even though the grapes were square in shape. Vaclavik subsequently found an example of square 'grapes' embroidered next to round ones and concluded that the square ones represented dice used in fortune-telling games. However, when the *dice* motif is traced with the positive and negative elements reversed, a *sown field* fertility symbol results.

### Conclusions

Familiarity with a society's spiritual and material culture can reveal to the investigator that the significance of a textile may not be in the cloth or clothing itself, but in the motif on the cloth. I encourage those who investigate textiles, whether or not they have an interest in semiotic research, to include in their inquiries, questions concerning not only the names that are given to motifs, but their significance and whether the motifs appear on other items in the culture.

An abstracted or non-objective textile motif may resemble a row of ducks that in turn, may remind villagers of a proverb dealing with the necessity of conforming to rules. However, inquiry must go beyond this when the same motif also appears on the architecture of the culture or is always deemed necessary on ceremonial clothing. Discovery of such information helps to fill in the 'big picture' of cultural connections. It affirms the importance of textiles as a serious subject of research and contributes to what Clifford Geertz called the "refinement of debate".

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